

Labor Organization During the Gilded Age

Excerpted from: *Death in the Haymarket* by James Green

Leading Illinois Republicans who gathered at Lincoln's grave on May 4, 1865, rejoiced that free labor had triumphed over the slave system in that great war now won. They believed a new nation had emerged from the bloody conflict, new because now all of its people were "wholly free." The 4 million bondsmen the "martyred emancipator" had liberated were, said the Tribune, a living epistle to Lincoln's immortality. But were all the people now wholly free?

IN THE YEARS after Lincoln's death, emancipated slaves found many compelling reasons to question the meaning of their new freedom in the face of the reign of white terror that descended upon them. At the same time, for quite different reasons, workingmen, the very mechanics who benefited most from the free labor system Lincoln had extolled, began to doubt the nature of their liberty. A few months before the war ended, the nation's most influential trade union leader, William H. Sylvester, came to Chicago and sounded an alarm that echoed in many labor newspapers in the closing months of the war. The president of the powerful Iron Molders' International Union excoriated employers who took advantage of the war emergency to fatten their profits while keeping their employees on lean wages. When union workers protested with strikes, politicians called them traitors, soldiers drove them back to work, and many loyal union men were fired and blacklisted by their bosses in retaliation. How, Sylvester asked, could a republic at war with the principle of slavery make it a felony for a workingman to exercise his right to protest, a right President Lincoln had once celebrated as the emblem of free labor? "What would it profit us, as a nation," the labor leader wondered, if the Union and its Constitution were preserved but essential republican principles were violated? If the "greasy mechanics and horny-handed sons of toil" who elected Abe Lincoln became slaves to work instead of self-educated citizens and producers, what would become of the Republic?

Focus Question:

- How did labor respond to the growing power of corporations and to what extent were they effective?

Directions: Gather information from the below sources and answer the focus question.

- NPR: Haymarket Remembered
- James Green excerpt above
- Assigned Strike
- Assigned Union goals and Constitutions

The Haymarket Riot Remembered

DEBBIE ELLIOTT, host:

In downtown Chicago, at the otherwise ordinary intersection of Des Plaines and Randolph, stands a brick colored statue with men on a hay wagon. The figure towering at the top is gesturing to an invisible crowd. The monument marks the site of the Haymarket Riot, a labor rally 120 years ago that ended in mayhem. Someone in the crowd tossed a bomb into a nearby line of police. The officers opened fire and when it was over, seven policemen and at least three protestors were dead.

The incident sparked the nation's first Red Scare. The events of May 4, 1886 are the subject of a new book, *Death in the Haymarket*, by historian James Green. I asked him what Chicago was like in 1886.

Mr. JAMES GREEN (Author, *Death in the Haymarket*): Well, Chicago was the workshop of the world, the wonder of the Second Industrial Revolution. It was also an immigrant city. A majority of the workers there were born in Europe. And it was a city that had a violent history. There was an uprising of railroad workers in 1877 that was put down very violently. The police force was highly armed, and people were expecting trouble because there was also a revolutionary element in the labor movement there, led by anarchists.

In March and April of 1886, a wave of protest began on behalf of the eight-hour day, and there were many strikes, and on May 3rd, at the McCormick Reaper Works, this is a giant farm implement plant, there was a lockout, and a riot began. The Chicago police came, shot some people. Two or at least three workers were shot. And then the following night, the anarchists called a protest rally against what they called police brutality in the Haymarket Square on Randolph Street.

ELLIOTT: Two of the leading voices of the movement were August Spies, a German immigrant, and Albert Parsons, a former confederate soldier? This sounds like a pretty motley crew.

Mr. GREEN: It's a strange group of people, given where they came from and the fact that they came to Chicago without any idea that they would ever end up being anarchists, especially Parsons, who grew up on a ranch in Texas, and he volunteered as a young man for the Confederate Cavalry. But after the war, he came back to East Texas and was a radical supporter of black rights in Texas, and this was a very violent area at the time. So when he came to Chicago, he had already had a lot of experience in social and political struggles.

ELLIOTT: And Mr. Spies?

Mr. GREEN: Spies was a young man on the make, very highly read. He grew up in the forests of Germany. He had a pretty privileged life. But when he came to America and traveled around, he saw a lot of things that he found very disturbing, particularly the killing of 30 people, workers, during the 1877 railroad strike. That had a big impact on him, and he was a very successful organizer and publisher and speaker in this very, very large German community that was predominantly working class.

ELLIOTT: So let's get now to what happened on the night of May 4, 1886. Spies, Parsons and other speakers are climbing up on this hay wagon. They're addressing the crowd. The Chicago police are watching nearby, and everything appears peaceful. Even the mayor calls it a tame meeting. What goes wrong?

Mr. GREEN: Well, the company of police approach the wagon, and the captain ordered the speaker to disburse, and he argued and said but we are peaceful, and he said never mind, you have to go, and so they, he climbed down from the wagon. The speakers were leaving, and at that point someone, and to this day, we don't know who it was, threw the bomb that caused such havoc, and a police riot broke out.

Naturally, the police were totally unprepared for this, and they all had guns and started shooting, and some of them were probably wounded and killed by, quote, "friendly fire," unquote, and that was the Haymarket Riot, and the anarchists were indicted for this crime, the Crime of the Century.

ELLIOTT: Now, James Green, you write that the hunt for the anarchists responsible for this turned into a frenzy right thereafter. Something like 200 people were arrested?

Mr. GREEN: Right. People were paralyzed with fear, and the police had, you know, really license to act and round up everybody they suspected, all immigrants except for Parsons. And you know, civil liberties went out the window. Homes were raided without search warrants. People were held incommunicado and with complete public support. I mean, people wanted these anarchists, suspected anarchists, rounded up and put on trial.

ELLIOTT: So eventually, eight of them were brought to trial, including Spies and Parsons, but what's interesting is that none of them were charged with actually throwing the bomb.

Mr. GREEN: They were charged with being accessories to murder and charged with being parties of a conspiracy that had been hatched a few nights before with, presumably, with the bomber present. The evidence of this, however, was very flimsy, and their defense lawyers, and later the governor of Illinois, thought they were really being tried for what they had said in their speeches more than for what they had done. It was almost as though, even if they didn't have the bomb, someone had to pay for this crime.

ELLIOTT: Now, the defendants didn't really help themselves on the witness stand. Take Albert Parsons, for example, tell us about his defense.

Mr. GREEN: Well, they were, you could only say militant in their response to these charges, and Parsons even went so far as to continue to justify the use of dynamite in the social struggle. He called it the great equalizer, that powerless people didn't have armies and guns but they had dynamite. So he was not a man who was begging for mercy, and this was, some might say, a fool-hearty act, and yet they were already playing, I think, to their place in history.

ELLIOTT: Some of the defendants were eventually pardoned, but four of them, August Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer, went to the gallows. What was the reaction to these hangings?

Mr. GREEN: Well, the immigrants who were very much involved in propelling this militant movement, this visionary movement, were very intimidated. You know, the Haymarket trial was a show trial. The hangings were an indication of what would happen to you if you said the things the anarchists said and if you opposed the state and the police. There was a reaction in the legislature. An eight-hour day was outlawed.

It was a very repressive period, and almost immediately, a sense set in that maybe some mistake had been made, and certainly this happened in the immigrant communities and in the labor movement where people began to say that a great injustice had been done, and the fact that it was immigrants made it seem even more serious to people who were new to the United States and hoping that this was a place where the jury trial system really worked well and there was liberty and justice for all.

ELLIOTT: James Green teaches history at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. His book is called *Death in the Haymarket*. Thank you for talking with us.

Mr. GREEN: Thank you.

ELLIOTT: You can find out more about Haymarket's legacy at our website, npr.org.

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In other cities in the country too, labor candidates ran, electing a mayor in Milwaukee, and various local officials in Fort Worth, Texas; Eaton, Ohio; and Leadville, Colorado.

It seemed that the weight of Haymarket had not crushed the labor movement. The year 1886 became known to contemporaries as "the year of the great uprising of labor." From 1881 to 1885, strikes had averaged about 500 each year, involving perhaps 150,000 workers each year. In 1886 there were over 1,400 strikes, involving 500,000 workers. John Commons, in his *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, saw in that:

the signs of a great movement by the class of the unskilled, which had finally risen in rebellion.... The movement bore in every way the aspect of a social war. A frenzied hatred of labour for capital was shown in every important strike.... Extreme bitterness toward capital manifested itself in all the actions of the Knights of Labor, and wherever the leaders undertook to hold it within bounds, they were generally discarded by their followers....

Even among southern blacks, where all the military, political, and economic force of the southern states, with the acquiescence of the national government, was concentrated on keeping them docile and working, there were sporadic rebellions. In the cotton fields, blacks were dispersed in their work, but in the sugar fields, work was done in gangs, so there was opportunity for organized action.

By 1886, the Knights of Labor was organizing in the sugar fields. The black workers, unable to feed and clothe their families on their wages, often paid in store scrip, asked a dollar a day. The following year, in the fall, close to ten thousand sugar laborers went on strike, 90 percent of them Negroes and members of the Knights. The militia arrived and gun battles began.

Violence erupted in the town of Thibodaux, Louisiana, where hundreds of strikers, evicted from their plantation shacks, gathered, penniless and ragged, carrying their bed clothing and babies. Their refusal to work threatened the entire sugar crop, and martial law was declared in Thibodaux. Henry and George Cox, two Negro brothers, leaders in the Knights of Labor, were arrested, locked up, then taken from their cells, and never heard from again. On the night of November 22, shooting broke out, each side claiming the other was at fault; by noon the next day, thirty Negroes were dead or dying, and hundreds wounded. Two whites were wounded. A Negro newspaper in New Orleans wrote:

...Lame men and blind women shot; children and hoary-headed grand-sires ruthlessly swept down! The Negroes offered no resistance; they could not, as the killing was unexpected. Those of them not killed took to the woods, a majority of them finding refuge in this city.... Citizens of the United States killed by a mob directed by a State judge.... Laboring men seeking an advance in wages, treated as if they were dogs!...

Native-born poor whites were not doing well either. In the South, they were tenant farmers rather than landowners. In the southern cities, they were tenants, not homeowners. And the slums of the southern cities were among the worst, poor whites living like the blacks, on unpaved dirt streets "choked up with garbage, filth and mud," according to a report of one state board of health.

In the year 1891, miners of the Tennessee Coal Mine Company were asked to sign an "iron-clad contract": pledging no strikes, agreeing to get paid in scrip, and giving up the right to check the weight of the coal they mined (they were paid by the weight). They refused to sign and were evicted from their houses. Convicts were brought in to replace them.

On the night of October 31, 1891, a thousand armed miners took control of the mine area, set five hundred convicts free, and burned down the stockades in which the convicts were kept. The companies surrendered, agreeing not to use convicts, not to require the "iron-clad contract," and to let the miners check on the weight of the coal they mined.

The following year, there were more insurrections in Tennessee. Miners overpowered guards of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, burned the stockades, shipped the convicts to Nashville. Other unions in Tennessee came to their aid. An observer reported back to the Chattanooga Federation of Trades: "The entire district is as one over the main proposition, 'the convicts must go.' I counted 840 rifles on Monday as the miners passed.... Whites and Negroes are standing shoulder to shoulder."

That same year, in New Orleans, forty-two union locals, with over twenty thousand members, mostly white but including some blacks (there was one black on the strike committee), called a general strike involving half the population of the city. Work in New Orleans came to a stop. After three days—with strikebreakers brought in, martial law, and the threat of militia—the strike ended with a compromise, gaining hours and wages but without recognition of the unions as bargaining agents.

The year 1892 saw strike struggles all over the country: besides the general strike in New Orleans and the coal miners' strike in Tennessee, there

Two was a railroad switchmen's strike in Buffalo, New York, and a copper miners' strike in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The Coeur d'Alene strike was marked by gun battles between strikers and strikebreakers, and many deaths.

In early 1892, the Carnegie Steel plant at Homestead, Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh, was being managed by Henry Clay Frick while Carnegie was in Europe. Frick decided to reduce the workers' wages and break their union. He built a fence three miles long and twelve feet high around the steelworks and topped it with barbed wire, adding peepholes for rifles. When the workers did not accept the pay cut, Frick laid off the entire work force. The Pinkerton detective agency was hired to protect strikebreakers.

On the night of July 5, 1892, hundreds of Pinkerton guards boarded barges five miles down the river from Homestead and moved toward the plant, where ten thousand strikers and sympathizers waited. The crowd warned the Pinkertons not to step off the barge. A striker lay down on the gangplank, and when a Pinkerton man tried to shove him aside, he fired, wounding the detective in the thigh. In the gunfire that followed on both sides, seven workers were killed.

The Pinkertons had to retreat onto the barges. They were attacked from all sides, voted to surrender, and then were beaten by the enraged crowd. There were dead on both sides. For the next several days the strikers were in command of the area. Now the state went into action: the governor brought in the militia, armed with the latest rifles and Gatling guns, to protect the import of strikebreakers.

Strike leaders were charged with murder; 160 other strikers were tried for other crimes. All were acquitted by friendly juries. The strike held for four months, but the plant was producing steel with strikebreakers who were brought in, often in locked trains, not knowing their destination, not knowing a strike was on. The strikers, with no resources left, agreed to return to work, their leaders blacklisted.

In the midst of the Homestead strike, a young anarchist from New York named Alexander Berkman, in a plan prepared by anarchist friends in New York, including his lover Emma Goldman, came to Pittsburgh and entered the office of Henry Clay Frick, determined to kill him. Berkman's aim was poor; he wounded Frick and was overwhelmed, then was tried and found guilty of attempted murder.

He served fourteen years in the state penitentiary. His *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* gave a graphic description of the assassination attempt and of his years in prison, when he changed his mind about the usefulness of assassinations but remained a dedicated revolutionary. Emma Goldman's autobiography, *Living My Life*, conveys the anger, the sense of injustice, the desire for a new kind of life, that grew among the young radicals of that day.

The year 1893 saw the biggest economic crisis in the country's history. After several decades of wild industrial growth, financial manipulation, uncontrolled speculation and profiteering, it all collapsed: 642 banks failed and 16,000 businesses closed down. Out of the labor force of 15 million, 3 million were unemployed. No state government voted relief, but mass demonstrations all over the country forced city governments to set up soup kitchens and give people work on streets or parks.

In New York City, in Union Square, Emma Goldman addressed a huge meeting of the unemployed and urged those whose children needed food to go into the stores and take it. She was arrested for "inciting to riot" and sentenced to two years in prison. In Chicago, it was estimated that 200,000 people were without work, the floors and stairways of City Hall and the police stations packed every night with homeless men trying to sleep.

The depression lasted for years and brought a wave of strikes throughout the country. The largest of these was the nationwide strike of railroad workers in 1894 that began at the Pullman Company in Illinois, just outside of Chicago.

Railroad work was one of the most dangerous jobs in America; over two thousand railroad workers were being killed each year, and thirty thousand injured. The *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* said: "It comes to this: while railroad managers reduce their force and require men to do double duty, involving loss of rest and sleep... the accidents are chargeable to the greed of the corporation."

It was the Depression of 1893 that propelled Eugene Debs into a lifetime of action for unionism and socialism. He had worked on the railroads for four years until he was nineteen, but left when a friend was killed after falling under a locomotive. He read Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, it deeply affected him.

In the midst of the economic crisis of 1893, a small group of railroad workers, including Debs, formed the American Railway Union, to unite all railway workers. Debs said: "It has been my life's desire to unify railroad employees and to eliminate the aristocracy of labor... and organize them so all will be on an equality...."

Debs wanted to include everyone, but blacks were kept out: at a convention in 1894, the provision in the constitution barring blacks was affirmed by a vote of 112 to 100. Later, Debs thought this might have had a

Homestead
Strike

well

crucial effect on the outcome of the Pullman strike, for black workers were in no mood to cooperate with the strikers.

In June 1894, workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company went on strike. They received immediate support from other unions in the Chicago area. The Pullman strikers appealed to a convention of the American Railway Union for support:

Mr. President and Brothers of the American Railway Union. We struck at Pullman because we were without hope. We joined the American Railway Union because it gave us a glimmer of hope. Twenty thousand souls, men, women and little ones, have their eyes turned toward this convention today, straining eagerly through dark despondency for a glimmer of the heaven-sent message you alone can give us on this earth....

You all must know that the proximate cause of our strike was the discharge of two members of our grievance committee.... Five reductions in wages.... Pullman, both the man and the town, is an ulcer on the body politic. He owns the houses, the schoolhouses, and churches of God in the town he gave his once humble name....

The American Railway Union responded. It asked its members all over the country not to handle Pullman cars. Since virtually all passenger trains had Pullman cars, this amounted to a boycott of all trains—a nationwide strike. Soon all traffic on the twenty-four railroad lines leading out of Chicago had come to a halt. Workers derailed freight cars, blocked tracks, pulled engineers off trains if they refused to cooperate.

The General Managers Association, representing the railroad owners, agreed to pay two thousand deputies, sent in to break the strike. But the strike went on. The attorney general of the United States, Richard Olney, a former railroad lawyer, now got a court injunction against blocking trains, on the legal ground that the federal mails were being interfered with. When the strikers ignored the injunction, President Cleveland ordered federal troops to Chicago. On July 6, hundreds of cars were burned by strikers.

The following day, the state militia moved in. A crowd of five thousand gathered. Rocks were thrown at the militia, and the command was given to fire. The *Chicago Times* reported:

The command to charge was given.... From that moment only bayonets were used.... A dozen men in the front line of rioters received bayonet wounds.... The police were not inclined to be merciful, and driving the mob against the barbed wires clubbed it unmercifully.... The ground

over which the fight had occurred was like a battlefield. The men shot by the troops and police lay about like logs....

In Chicago that day, thirteen people were killed, fifty-three seriously wounded, seven hundred arrested. Before the strike was over, perhaps thirty-four were dead. With fourteen thousand police, militia, troops in Chicago, the strike was crushed. Debs was arrested for contempt of court, for violating the injunction that said he could not do or say anything to carry on the strike.

Debs, in court, denied he was a socialist. But during his six months in prison, he studied socialism and talked to fellow prisoners who were socialists. Later he wrote: "I was to be baptized in Socialism in the roar of conflict...in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed...."

Two years after he came out of prison, Debs wrote in the *Railway Times*: "The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society—we are on the eve of a universal change."

Thus, the eighties and nineties saw bursts of labor insurrection, more organized than the spontaneous strikes of 1877. There were now revolutionary movements influencing labor struggles, the ideas of socialism affecting labor leaders. Radical literature was appearing, speaking of fundamental changes, of new possibilities for living.

In this same period, those who worked on the land—farmers, North and South, black and white—were going far beyond the scattered tenant protests of the pre-Civil War years and creating the greatest movement of agrarian rebellion the country had ever seen.

Behind the despair so often registered in the farm country literature of that day, there must have been visions, from time to time, of a different way to live, as in a Hamlin Garland novel, *A Spoil of Office*, where the heroine speaks at a farmers' picnic:

I see a time when the farmer will not need to live in a cabin on a lonely farm. I see the farmers coming together in groups. I see them with time to read, and time to visit with their fellows. I see them enjoying lectures in beautiful halls, erected in every village. I see them gather like the Saxons of old upon the green at evening to sing and dance. I see cities rising near them with schools, and churches, and concert halls and theaters. I see a day when the farmer will no longer be a drudge and his wife a bond